

I hate that I always jump when my phone buzzes. I throw my car into park and check who it was. The contact pops up as 'Mira's mom,' and man, I need to learn her name. The text reads, "Elle, thank you so much for volunteering. I couldn't leave Sunny and Rory alone for the whole night. I'll be back around one or two—" There's more, but I shut off my phone and swing my legs around, getting out of the car. And tripping. I look around to make sure nobody saw that (embarrassing!), and sure enough, nobody's outside, because Mira's neighbors are all freaks of nature and the world's most antisocial people. I've only ever met the old lady across the street, who was nice enough, but she couldn't figure out a cell phone if her grandkids' lives depended on it.

I head toward the house, and Rory starts barking again. She always does, whenever I get within a hundred feet of the driveway. Maybe she senses my presence. Or something. The noise seems annoyingly loud, louder than usual, in the dark. She calms down when I pat her on the head and lets me through the door. Sunny greets me in the living room, butting her head against my leg, which is weird because since when has she liked me? I bend down to pet her and, true to her nature, she bolts. Strange cat.

In the kitchen, Mira's mom's left a note for me. Feed the cat when I get here, let the dog out at ten, there's pizza in the fridge, remember to check the camera app. I say thank you out loud, then feel like an idiot, because literally nobody else is here and who the heck am I talking to. I reread the list again. My phone dings, but I

don't check it, deciding to go feed Sunny instead, even though she'll be suspicious and won't eat it; she never does when I feed her.

I open the door to the basement, and flip the switch. The light flickers, then dies on me. I bang on the wall a couple times, but it doesn't spark back up, so I turn on my phone flashlight and just use that instead. It's a million times scarier without the overhead light, and I dart towards the cat food, grab a can, then bolt up the stairs.

Spooning it into her bowl, I gag a bit at the smell of the stuff. I throw the can towards the trash can and, surprisingly, it lands. I scrub at my hands, trying to get the feel of canned tuna off my skin, and reach for my phone to download the app Mira's family uses for cameras. I use the login her mom gave me last time I pet-sat, but there's no notifications. The last alert was 6:42, when Mira's mom left for whatever she's doing tonight.

Then Rory starts barking again.

"Rory, shut up," I pull her away from the door, and peek outside. "There's nothing out there, girl." She looks up at me, like she understands, and pads away quietly. Feeling a bit guilty, I hesitate, then glance once more out the door to confirm that there's nothing out there. I close it, feeling more confident, and check the time on the microwave when I go back to the kitchen. 9:30. Still don't have to let Rory out for the night. I grab the pizza from the fridge and look at Mira's microwave, but I'm too hungry to wait, and eat it cold.

I move to the living room and curl up on the sofa with the remote, when a flash of movement catches my eye. A white car's pulled up outside the house, but I can't see any details. I worry for the owner a bit, the car was

going quite fast when it parked, but I don't go out. Too dark. I turn back to the TV, some mindless movie is on, making for some decent background noise. A shadow moves outside, and I glance to see a bird flying over my car.

I look back at the screen, trying not to feel weird about the car-shadow thing. I mean, people park all the time. The dark makes everything seem spooky, it's just bad timing. Not my problem. My brain's making things up again, just like it always does. My therapist says I catastrophize. Sure.

The movie's maybe a quarter through when I look at the time again. 10:02. I'm late for dog duty. I get up, stretching a bit, then head for the back door, where Rory's already waiting for me. She thumps her tail, knocking on the back door repeatedly, and I let her out. She disappears into the dark, although I know she's contained by a fence.

Heading back into the kitchen, I find that Sunny's vanished. I go up the stairs into the guest bedroom, where some of my stuff already is. I've basically moved in with Mira at this point.

My phone goes off, but when I pick it up, all it is is a sale for some stupid home decor brand. I swipe out of the app and check the camera feed, more out of boredom than concern. I spot Sunny in the office upstairs. Something falls over behind her, making her jump and bolt. I look a little closer, but nothing's there; her tail must've made it fall. I don't hear a crash from upstairs, so I don't think anything broke. The cameras don't have audio, though, so it's hard to tell.

I put my phone down and glance at the analog clock on the nightstand. 10:12. It feels like something's

wrong. I should bring Rory in, just in case. I take a step towards the door, but before I even reach it, my phone buzzes again. Aiden.

“Elle, I just want to talk.” Clingy ex? Check. I bite my lip for a second, thinking of how to respond, and type out, “Dude, no, you’re freaking weird,” but before I can send it, another text comes through.

“Please. I’m already here.”

My eyes flicker to the bedroom window. The white car’s still out there, parked like someone was in a rush. I don’t text back, just check the cameras. I didn’t see anyone get out of the car, though, I try to rationalize with myself as I flip through the rooms. Sunny under the desk in the office. Rory at the back door, curled in the doghouse outside. Nothing in the hallway, kitchen, living room, or upstairs, but something just feels off. I hesitate, then flip back through the cameras.

Office. Back door. Hallway. Kitchen. And there’s a figure with its back turned to me, a hood pulled over its head so I can’t see who it might be. But Aiden’s text comes back to me, and I know that it’s him. It’s always him, doing something. Messing with my life, chipping my car windshield. Four times. I thought it would be over if I left him, especially after he moved away, and now it’s just not.

I suck in a breath. Aiden doesn’t know where I am. That’s something. But he’s searching, I can tell. I watch him turn around and notice there’s a knife missing from its holder. I scan again. He’s holding it like it’s a weapon. And I panic.

My heart stops, and I tap the screen like an idiot. Like that’s going to change what I’m seeing. But, I tell myself again, he doesn’t know where I am. He’s getting

closer, though. And I'm pretty sure he knows where the guest bedroom is. I watch him on the cameras, turning to the staircase, and I freeze. There's nowhere else I'd be if not the guest bedroom, and I know he knows. Aiden's never been stupid. In a frantic moment, I dart across the hallway and hide behind the bathroom door. It's an awful spot, I know it is, and if he checks there, he'll immediately see me in the mirror. I turn off my phone, stopping the light, right as he rounds the top of the stairs and makes a beeline straight for the room I was in just seconds ago.

He pauses at the doorway, and I can't tell if he's going to look further in or turn around and catch me in the bathroom. For a few terrifying heartbeats, he stands there. Then he moves into the bedroom, towards the closet. Aiden's far enough away that I think I can make it. I send a silent prayer up to whatever deity isn't busy at the moment and bolt, sprinting down the stairs two at a time. I don't look to see if he's behind me.

I already know he is.